

American Exceptionalism in Presidential Rhetoric

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A recent Gallup poll showed that a huge majority of Americans (80%) agreed with the following statement: “the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world.” When asked whether the United States has “a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs,” two-thirds of the respondents gave a positive answer.¹ Although not termed in the well-known expression, the results of this questionnaire prove that the large majority of the United States still subscribes to the notion of American exceptionalism. In an era when Barack Obama preaches more moderation on part of his country than perhaps any of his predecessors, and the United States is facing serious economic and political questions, both domestic and foreign, this finding might be a bit surprising. Yet, it indicates one thing: that the general American belief, which articulates that this nation has a larger-than-life role in shaping the form of the world because it possesses a special status as God’s chosen nation still strongly claims an exceptional place in the national psyche. The overwhelming majority still clings to the “city on the hill” metaphor as the underlying justification for the United States as beacon to the free world, as an example to behold.

American exceptionalism has been in the past few decades a growing field of scholarly literature. It interests different kinds of people such as historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or other observers

¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Americans See U.S. as Exceptional; 37% Doubt Obama Does.” Gallop Poll Report, December 22, 2010.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/145358/Americans-Exceptional-Doubt-Obama.aspx>,
accessed November 22, 2013.

dealing with some aspect of American culture.² In the early twenty-first century the American military involvement in Iraq is basically over, and it is coming to a close in Afghanistan as well. The incumbent American president is advocating modesty, and many predict the rise of China and the subsequent fall, or, at least, decline, of the United States. The consensus seems solid: the American Century is over. The obvious conclusion also appears easy to reach: it is time American exceptionalism took a backseat. But the notion of the United States being a unique, special, or exceptional country is so deeply engraved in the American psyche that it would be a rash prediction to state that this concept will disappear any time soon.

There can be debate about what just American exceptionalism really is, or whether it is one concept, or rather a series of idea(l)s about the United States, or just a bunch of myths so gratifying to believe in.³ At any rate, it can be safely asserted that this notion of chosenness, being an example to the rest of the world, and some form of mission coming from the previous tenets are part of what one might label American exceptionalism. As one scholar puts it, it is “the notion that the United States has had a unique destiny and history, or more modestly, a history with high distinctive features or an unusual trajectory.”⁴ As another observer put it, “America marches to a different drummer. Its uniqueness is explained by any or all of a variety of reasons: history, size, geography,

² A few of the main works dealing with the topic are Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. University of Chicago Press, 1968, 1980; Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1991; Seymour Martin Lipsett, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: Norton, 1996; Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 1998; David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002; Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2007; Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power. The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008; Godfrey Hodgson's *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. Yale U P, 2009; Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

³ As to the origin of the term see James W. Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Spring 2012), 1–26.

⁴ Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45:1 (1993), 6.

political institutions, and culture.”⁵ According to Tyrell, the concept has three main pillars: a religious; a political, and a material or economic.⁶ Everybody agrees on one important thing: American exceptionalism is part of the national identity of the United States, a self-sustaining myth that refuses to lie down.

Since the American colonists founded their own country, and since the first president of the United States, George Washington, the nation’s father figure, fulfilled the role of the chief executive, it has been a well-discernible feature that American presidents, irrespective of party and politics, have all subscribed to American exceptionalism in one form or another. Obviously, there have been differences in the emotional charge, and some expressed such feelings more often than others, but it has been a constant feature for well over two centuries now. Given the president’s status as the leader of the nation, his words, or proclamations, but even his private letters, amount to a large degree of influence over the thinking of the nation. That is the reason why it is worth investigating the presidential rhetoric concerning American exceptionalism throughout more than two hundred years, and see to what extent these persons have subscribed to the notion, how much they used it, and how important this may have been in their attempts at shaping the politics and everyday life in the United States.

It is important to mention at the outset that this idea that America is somehow different than the rest of the world, which is to a large measure true, and that America represents the best possible form of government and opportunity to freedom, and, therefore, it is unique and better than any other country, which is inherently a false interpretation of history and is a distorted perception of reality, is an ingrained belief. It is in the American DNA, it is a notion they all share, and it is an unquestionable conviction. Although in expressing such a view on part of a politician, there is often a small part of sounding as patriotic as possible for political reasons, still, the two just strengthen each other. A president speaks about his country’s special status both because he believes in it and because he wants the populace to like and agree with him. Since American

⁵ Richard Rose, "How Exceptional is the American Political Economy?" *Political Science Quarterly* (1989) 104.1, 91–115.

⁶ Ian Tyrrell, "The Myth(s) That Will Not Die: American National Exceptionalism," in Gérard Bouchard, ed., *Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents* (New York: Routledge, 2013),

exceptionalism is a strong belief, it cannot be handled with reason or persuasion. The country's long run of success in basically any set of measurement made it easy to believe that this new country, with its new form of government, was a God-sent "gift" to mankind, and exactly this is why there is the "mission" component of American exceptionalism. In this reading it is not enough to shine as the bright example to follow; the United States has a mission. This is nothing less than to spread freedom all over the world. As will be seen, this understanding showed ebbs and flows depending both on the international scene and events and on the personality and worldview of the president.

George Washington, who laid down so many traditions concerning the president's office, was conspicuous in preaching American exceptionalism as well. Inauguration addresses are a good platform to assert programs and beliefs, therefore it was a good place for the young nation's first president to claim that "Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency." Here, in Washington's rhetoric such a line of thought is expressed that has been always there, before and after winning independence from Great Britain, that "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."⁷ With these lines Washington gave green light to his close and distant followers in the presidency to assert their belief and approval of America's high destinies.

Of the early presidents it is Thomas Jefferson who expressed his conviction about the aforementioned characteristics and mission of his beloved United States more often than his contemporaries. Although John Adams is known to have claimed that America's cause "is that of all nations and all men," and that the young United States one day would "form the greatest empire in the world," it was the taciturn Jefferson who really kept the fire blazed.⁸ True to his nature, Jefferson loved to express

⁷ First Inaugural Address of George Washington, April 30, 1789, *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents*, Revised and updated, edited and with Introductions by John Gabriel Hunt, New York: Gramercy Books, 6, (hereafter cited as Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*).

⁸ John Adams to Francis Dana, early 1781, In David McCullough, *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, 253, and 395.

himself more in writing than in public. Therefore, many of his such expressions come from letters written to others. Together with his few public speeches they give the first full charge of American exceptionalism in presidential vocabulary.

Jefferson well before his ascendance to the highest office of the land expressed his belief about America's moral superiority, especially over Europe. This man, who believed that the American Revolution and the consequences springing from it "will ameliorate the condition of man over a great portion of the globe," thought that if one made a distinction between the Old and the New World, the result would be "like a comparison of heaven and hell."⁹ Jefferson's time in France largely added to his antipathy and he did not mince his words on the capabilities of European leaders as he saw them: "I can further say with safety there is not a crowned head in Europe whose talents or merits would entitle him to be elected a vestryman by the people of any parish in America."¹⁰ For Jefferson, the American Revolution and gaining independence from the strongest power in the world were justification of thinking of his nation as different, better, and exemplary. He subscribed to his metaphor based on laws of motion in which he prophesied about the expansion of freedom following the American path: "This ball of liberty, I believe most piously, is now so well in motion that it will roll around the globe."¹¹

With his becoming president he felt he had succeeded in two different revolutions: first as member of a nation against Great Britain; second, as leader of the Democratic-Republican party, as an opposing force to the monarchist Federalists led by Alexander Hamilton, his arch enemy. As the first person of the United States, Jefferson felt no restraint about expressing the sentiment that America was "a rising nation" that was "advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye." In his first official communication as president he also set the rhetorical milestone picked up by many of his future followers: "this Government,

⁹ Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson, without date, In. Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004, 627, and Jefferson to George Wythe, August 13, 1786, In. Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx. The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, 84.

¹⁰ Jefferson to Washington, May 2, 1788, In. Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 25 vols. to date, Princeton, 1950-, vol. XIII, 128.

¹¹ Jefferson to Trench Coxe, June 1, 1796, In. Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. New York, 1892-99. vol. VII, 22.

the world's best hope".¹² Only two days later he gave proof for the exemplary strain of the American mission as well, when he wrote to another Founding Father that "a just and solid republican government maintained here, will be a standing monument and example for the aim and imitation of the people of other countries."¹³ A year later he wrote that "We feel that we are acting under obligations not confined to the limits of our own society. It is impossible not to be sensible that we are acting for all mankind."¹⁴ This is an early testament to the conviction that the United States, with its democratic form of government and virtuous morale, supposedly, would be an example to follow for the rest of the world. It is interesting to note that Jefferson with time lost some of his fervent optimism in the future of his "empire," although he never shared this more pessimistic side of his with the people at large, and in the common remembrance his earlier uttered and written words remained the yardstick.

His fellow Virginian presidents did not fall far from the Jeffersonian view. They shared the same social and educational background, they were Founding Fathers of a nation that was to prove its exceptional status to the world. James Monroe, for example, although mainly famous for the doctrine bearing his name, also made a bold statement about the United States' unique status. He saw his country as one that had "flourished beyond example," and which, with perseverance and with the benevolent gaze from God, would "attain the high destiny which seems to await us."¹⁵ Thus the tradition was well established and party formations may have changed, the challenges may have continued rising, the belief in comforting American exceptionalism remained, and, if anything, it kept growing.

Andrew Jackson spoke for many when he thought that the whole world was closely watching what was going on in the United States. This in many ways first modern president, who expanded presidential rights

¹² First Inaugural Address of Thomas Jefferson, March 4, 1801, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 25.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson, March 6, 1801, In. *The Essential Jefferson*. Edited, and with an Introduction by Albert Fried. New York: Collier Books, 1963, 407.

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Priestley, 1802, In. Clinton Rossiter, "The American Mission," *The American Scholar*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter 1950–51), 22.

¹⁵ First Inaugural Address of James Monroe, March 4, 1817, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 58.

and with this became a precedent to all of his followers in the White House, in his farewell address also left an indelible mark on the mission component: "Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race."¹⁶ This is the line that many have taken throughout the times, namely that the United States is not only the bastion of freedom, not only the chosen nation by favor of God, but it also has a responsibility toward the world, which is manifest in spreading freedom. Obviously, as long as the United States was a weak country, this view had to take a backseat. With time and the country becoming more powerful than those in its way, it became a more and more important vision: the United States can defend liberty by expanding it. The first such big test came with the Mexican–American War in 1846, in which American forces easily defeated the Mexicans, and by gaining huge territories on the North American continent they managed to forward freedom's march, or so the majority interpreted the events. This is what President Polk referred to as "the fire of liberty, which warms and animates the hearts of happy millions and invites all the nations of the earth to imitate our example."¹⁷

With the coming of the Civil War there was a big break in American exceptionalism in the sense that the shining beacon of freedom threw its light at a scene of a bloodbath for years. Interestingly, however, this did not prove to be a fatal blow to the concept. On the contrary, the notion was able to spring even higher than before. Abraham Lincoln, one of the most venerated presidents is mostly remembered as the one who kept the Union together and not as an exponent of American exceptionalism. Still, it has to be noted that he shared such a view, gave examples of harboring it deeply, and he was also responsible for expanding it. Years before becoming president he proudly exclaimed that the United States was "a great empire" which stood "at once the wonder and admiration of the whole world."¹⁸ To him, God's "most chosen

¹⁶ Andrew Jackson, "Farewell Address," March 4, 1837. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=67087> accessed September 12, 2013.

¹⁷ Inaugural Address of James Knox Polk, March 4, 1845, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 144.

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Frémont, Buchanan, and the Extension of Slavery," Speech delivered at Kalamazoo, Michigan, August 27, 1856, In. Abraham Lincoln, *His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1962, 342.

people” had a mission as well. This time it was the saving of the Union, “the last best hope of earth,” the only one that could secure freedom and its possible spreading all over the globe.¹⁹ After being elected to the presidency, Lincoln assured some state senators that, in his interpretation, the War of Independence represented more than a birth of a new nation as it amounted to nothing less than “a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come.”²⁰

But Abraham Lincoln’s true legacy concerning American exceptionalism lies in his elevating the United States from a people to an idea. With his famous Gettysburg Address in the middle of the Civil War he spoke of the United States as “dedicated to a proposition,” and “he effected a revolution in America’s self-conception.”²¹ The United States became an idea in which one can live, but also an ideal to which one can strive for, one can try to achieve by imitating. The example of the country had become an unearthly paradigm, a call from God to be followed by everybody, and the United States stepped up as the main agent of it here on earth.

The next three decades were also full of similar references. Basically each president expressed his belief in the United States as special and an example to be followed by the world. Ulysses Grant believed that American republicanism was “destined to be the guiding star to all others,” Grover Cleveland echoed the same idea in labeling the American political system “the best form of government ever vouchsafed to man,” while Benjamin Harrison claimed that “God has placed upon our head a diadem and has laid at our feet power and wealth beyond definition or calculation.”²² When President William McKinley expressed his belief to the nation that “these years of glorious history have exalted mankind and advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world,” he

¹⁹ Address to the Senate of New Jersey, February 21, 1861, Ibid., 575, and Abraham Lincoln: “Second Annual Message,” December 1, 1862. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29503> accessed October 18, 2013.

²⁰ Address to the Senate of New Jersey, February 21, 1861, Lincoln, *His Speeches and Writings*, 575.

²¹ Justin Blake Litke, *American Exceptionalism: From Exemplar to Empire*. PhD Dissertation, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 2010, 252.

²² Second Inaugural Address of Ulysses S. Grant, March 4, 1873, First Inaugural Address of Grover Cleveland, March 4, 1885, and Inaugural Address of Benjamin Harrison, March 4, 1889, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 212, 248, and 263.

actually forecast the next few years' changes.²³ Toward the last decade of the nineteenth century the United States had become the most powerful industrial country and, given the American mission that they are an example to the world and it is their duty to spread civilization and their political form, it was only a question of time before these ideas were put in practice.

There is no denying that the United States became an empire with the events taking place around the turn of the century. By its successful win over Spain in 1898 the country secured various outer lands, and it also managed to annex Hawaii, so it firmly set its feet in the Pacific Ocean, which was crucial to a more successful and expanding trade. But although militarily shining, taking over territories was against the American Creed or ideal.²⁴ Similarly to the domestic debate at the time of the Mexican–American War, this was again a question whether the true American values and principles were manifest or the opposite was true. One camp was trumpeting that a civilized nation had its duty to spread advanced political and other forms to less civilized nations, a true manifestation of social Darwinism, which was so popular in the United States in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The other camp kept repeating that the United States was to affect the world by showing an example only, and not by exporting its democracy to other regions of the globe. This latter group saw the devaluation of American freedom and the loss of what the nation had been an example for. McKinley, however, could not disagree more with such a view. He exhorted the opposing section to understand that the majority of Americans, “after 125 years of achievement for mankind” obviously “reject as mistaken and unworthy the doctrine that we lose our own liberties by securing the enduring foundations of liberty to others. Our institutions will not deteriorate by extension, and our sense of justice will not abate under tropic suns in distant seas.”²⁵

²³ First Inaugural Address of William McKinley, March 4, 1897, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 282.

²⁴ Lipset included in this notion the following: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. In more detail see, Martin S. Lipset, *American exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

²⁵ Second Inaugural Address of William McKinley, March 4, 1897, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 292–3.

His vice president and follower in the long line of presidents was none other than Theodore Roosevelt, still one of the favorite presidents to Americans. He was a phenomenon, who, at least before becoming president, believed in the elevating joy of war. It was not only due to a manly conception of trial, but more of what being an American meant. He absolutely believed that his nation was exceptional, a torchbearer of a higher form of civilization. He had an unshaken faith in America as a force of distinguished example, and the duty and responsibility that came with such a status. The flag of the United States represented to him, and he hoped to everybody else, “liberty and civilization.”²⁶ The United States was nothing less than “the mightiest republic on which the sun ever shone,” whose values and moral standing was the admiration of the world.²⁷

With his becoming president in the wake of the assassination of McKinley in September 1901, Roosevelt gave his thoughts even a freer and larger outlet than before. In his mind there was no question about his being wrong, and this is all the more marvelous, because he was an educated man, possessing much bigger knowledge about the rest of the world than most of his contemporaries. But, as it was pointed out above, the belief in American exceptionalism is not an intellectual question but mainly an emotional one; there is not a reasonable subscription to it but a quasi-religious faith in it. Roosevelt was convinced that the American example must be taught as far as the other side of the globe. He used a Memorial Day speech to set forth the thought that Americans “can rapidly teach the people of the Philippine Islands...how to make good use of their freedom.”²⁸ This paternalistic attitude toward peoples considered on a lower rung of the ladder of civilization was a distinctive feature of American worldview at this time.

This was a forerunner of his (in)famous thesis, typically referred to as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. He had already expressed the idea of the duty of civilized powers in the international

²⁶ Theodore Roosevelt’s campaign speech, October 5, 1898, In. Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. [1979] New York: The Modern Library, 2001. Revised and updated edition, 715.

²⁷ Theodore Roosevelt’s speech at the opening of the Pan-American Exhibition, Buffalo, May 20, 1901, In. Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, xvii.

²⁸ Theodore Roosevelt’s speech on Memorial Day at Arlington, 1902, In. Morris, *Theodore Rex*. New York: Random House, 2001, 110.

arena, but in his 1904 annual message he clearly advocated the United States as the international police in the Americas. He deemed the American experience one upon which “the welfare of mankind” depended, and, therefore, the responsibility for the whole world was heavy, regarding present and future generations alike.²⁹ As much as he preached such duties, TR’s presidency was more realistic and practical than one would deduct from his utterances. Practical he may have been when it came to dealing with other foreign powers and not lesser states, he was not doubtful that the newly established place of his country among the traditional powers might “without irreverence be called providential,” and he saw the duty unfinished on going on a path clearly assigned for the United States.³⁰ He simply could not fathom that what his country and other great powers, such as Great Britain, did was not for the benefit of mankind at large. He believed that teaching democracy to other peoples was only the beginning. As he explained it to his Anglo-Saxon brethren, “In the long run there can be no justification for one race managing or controlling another unless the management and control are exercised in the interest and for the benefit of that other race. This is what our peoples have in the main done, and must continue in the future in even greater degree to do.”³¹

If there ever was such a president who can be identified as the exponent of American exceptionalism, it is Woodrow Wilson. The deeply idealistic president had a firm conviction that the United States had to lead mankind toward a higher status. On the road to dramatic victory in 1912, he made it clear that his nation was “chosen and prominently chosen to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty”.³² This was a notion he clung to and often reiterated in his professorial style to his constituency that his nation was “destined to set a responsible example to all the world of what free Government is and can do for the maintenance of right standards, both national and

²⁹ Inaugural Address of Theodore Roosevelt, March 4, 1905, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 301.

³⁰ Theodore Roosevelt’s speech in California, 1903, In. Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 229.

³¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Biological Analogies in History*, Delivered before the University of Oxford, June 7, 1910. London: Henry Frowde, 1910, 41.

³² Woodrow Wilson’s campaign address in Jersey City, NJ, May 25, 1912. In Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 319.

international.”³³ With the oncoming of World War I he was provided with the chance to make his ideas practical in a peace conference whose outcome should have been a shining victory for American moral leadership; the goal was to make the world safe for democracy. His idealistic worldview was simplified in the sense that the true American principles were fit for the rest of the world, because “they were the principles of a liberated mankind.”³⁴

The Paris peace conference, however, turned out to be far from a glorious adaptation of American principles by the leading European powers. Wilson may have believed that he was the apostle of peace and his program, the famous Fourteen Points, would bring salvation to the war-torn continent, but his idealistic aspirations were one by one deflated by Old World politicians who were dictated by raw national interests which, in turn, were driven by a thirst for revenge. Wilson’s stubborn persistence on the creation of the League of Nations held him hostage, and his dream of a democratic Europe following the American footsteps remained unfulfilled. Moreover, American public opinion refused to be entangled with European or other powers in such a supranational organization, thus Wilson’s defeat was absolute. Still, till his very last breath Wilson held onto the notion that his action had ushered the world into a better phase. In his last writing he asserted this distorted analysis of his work. He still claimed that “the world has been made safe for democracy.” But the Russian revolution and its consequences made him awake to a new danger against which democratic countries had to fight. “That supreme task, which is nothing less than the salvation of civilization, now faces democracy, insistent, imperative. There is no escaping it, unless everything we have built up is presently to fall in ruin about us.” He felt compelled to add, “and the United States, as the greatest of democracies, must undertake it.”³⁵ This last addition was a logical consummation of his belief in America’s role as the torchbearer for a more elevated and well-lit path for the rest of mankind to follow. As

³³ “Text of Wilson Appeal for League of Nations,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1920.

³⁴ Second Inaugural Address of Woodrow Wilson, March 4, 1917, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 332.

³⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “The Road Away from Revolution,” *Atlantic Monthly* 132 (August 1923): 146.

he put it elsewhere, “if America goes back upon mankind, mankind has no other place to turn.”³⁶

The 1920s and 1930s was a period when the United States turned away from Europe to a large degree, at least in the political realm. In other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Asia, it remained and became even more active, but with the onset of the Great Depression, the United States had to focus itself on to a measure perhaps unparalleled in its history. This does not mean, however, that the postwar period’s presidents would not utter words relating to American exceptionalism. President Harding, for example, saw “God’s intent in the making of this new-world Republic,” and he thought of his country as the embodiment of “an inspiring example of freedom and civilization to all mankind.”³⁷ Still, in this decade exceptionalism was not as important an assertion as in earlier times. During the 1920s the large majority of the people enjoyed life and became wealthier; living standards rose and people wanted to be entertained. As a consequence, they experienced all the more harshly the break that the years starting with 1930 brought to them. For many this was a time to hold on to a job, provide for a family, or simply to stay alive. It is understandable that during those years the loud trumpeting of being exceptional as compared to the rest of the world was forced to the background.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the man at the helm throughout the thirties and World War II was a very practical man, not conspicuously driven by high ideals, especially compared to Wilson. He, forced to a large degree by the compelling circumstances, showed a sensitive side to the social welfare of the masses, and when it came to keeping his country out then leading it into World War II, it was all about reaching victory. Only shortly before his death did he express words relating to his belief that his country was more than just any other great power. He let the American people and the world know that God “has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished

³⁶ Woodrow Wilson, Address at Sioux Falls, September 8, 1919, In. *The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Albert Shaw, vol. 2, (New York: Review of Reviews Corporation, 1924), 822.

³⁷ Inaugural Address of Warren G. Harding, March 4, 1921, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 338.

world.”³⁸ This may have had to do something with his slow realization what an enormous and dangerous challenge the United States would face after the conclusion of the war in the shape of the Soviet Union. Or it might have been his weakened physical health and the wind of coming death. At any rate, with his restricted performance in the field of American exceptionalism but full vigor in the leadership through perilous times in the life of the country, he may have done actually just as much if not more for the notion that the United States was different and better than the rest of the world.

With the end of the World War soon the Cold War had set in and this was a challenge unheard of in the history of the United States, a test for which many Americans were not ready in the beginning, but soon enough the country fought this “war” with all its might. Moreover, the country stood without any close contender in these years. Economically, the United States found itself way ahead of the world, with far the highest standard of living, most of the country taking full share of the postwar boom. It was the ideological and military fields where America had to compete with the Soviet Union. While the latter was tested by proxy wars on the other side of the globe, the former gave a perfect ground on which American exceptionalism could surge forward. With the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan the United States became the leader of the free world, the unchallenged first citizen of the West. The history of the country served as a comfortable explanation why the western, or rather, American ideology of free trade, freedom of speech and religion, along with such other facets of the United States as a society deeply imbedded in religion and an exceptionally wealthy citizenry should make their way of living the one to be followed in a sharp contrast to anything and everything the communist dictatorships could offer to, or, rather, demanded of their citizens.

Consequently, during the Cold War it was a rhetorical standard of presidents to invoke their country’s special status and exemplary eminence. The mission component of the American Creed and exceptionalism concepts, that is, the fervent wish to expand freedom all over the globe was amplified throughout these decades. The United States could boast of “good will, strength, and wise leadership,” bringing “new hope to all mankind” to the ultimate goal that was nothing less than to

³⁸ Fourth Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 20, 1945, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 396–7.

“advance toward a world where man’s freedom is secure.”³⁹ Irrespective of whether these presidents were Democrats or Republicans, they all whistled the same tune, despite the fact that when it came to domestic policy they saw things differently. That is the reason why Dwight D. Eisenhower’s words echoed those of Harry Truman’s. He spoke of destiny laying upon the United States “the responsibility of the free world’s leadership,” which called for a high degree of willingness to face and undertake “whatever sacrifices may be required of us.”⁴⁰ This is again the missionary approach to foreign affairs, but this is not so surprising if one hears from the same man that it is important to “recognize and accept our own deep involvement in the destiny of men everywhere.”⁴¹

John Fitzgerald Kennedy elevated American exceptionalism to an even higher level and, in many ways, it was he who brought it to the very front of everyday thinking. Naturally, this again can be attributed to the Cold War background or mentality, but the fact remains that his utterances on this subject appealed to a lot of Americans. Kennedy reached back to Winthrop and his “city upon a hill” metaphor, which by now has gained new meaning, found an expanded interpretation that might not have met the intentions of its author. Kennedy boldly claimed before his inauguration that Americans “do not imitate—for we are a model to others,” and echoed the well-known phrase that “the eyes of all people are truly upon us.”⁴² In his famous inauguration address he elevated the mission concept as the defining thread of American values. He confidently informed the nations, allies and foes alike, “that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”⁴³ This time the leader of the free world started to become the

³⁹ Inaugural Address of Harry S. Truman, January 20, 1949, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 402, 403, 408.

⁴⁰ First Inaugural Address of Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 20, 1953, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 415, 417.

⁴¹ Second Inaugural Address of Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 21, 1957, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 422.

⁴² Address of President-Elect John F. Kennedy Delivered to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, January 9, 1961, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/OYhUZE2Qo0-ogdV7ok900A.aspx> accessed January 9, 2014.

⁴³ Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy, January 20, 1961, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 428.

overarching idea of what the United States stood for. It is central to the whole topic that this is not a conscious choice on the part of Americans. As Kennedy was to put it, but the assassin's bullets stopped him from delivering on the promise expressed in his speech, "we in this country, in this generation, are—by destiny rather than choice—the watchmen on the walls of world freedom."⁴⁴

The void left by Kennedy's death was soon filled by repeated presidential invocations of the exceptionalism concept. As a follower of Kennedy both in the domestic and international arena while being deeply committed to the ideals of American exceptionalism, Lyndon Johnson proved to be a good disciple. He boldly trumpeted that "the American covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man. And that is today our goal."⁴⁵ Vietnam became the showcase of American military power and the stand for freedom. Johnson, with most of his compatriots, was absolutely sure that the United States walked the right path of history, and it belonged to it to vindicate others' hope and aspirations. If new circumstances arose, that was all well to America, since, according to Johnson, if a new world was coming, the American response was ready: "We welcome it—and we will bend it to the hopes of man."⁴⁶ This unshaken belief in America's infallible choices and decisions about the present, which was deemed nothing less than a destiny-driven march, suffered a rude awakening in South-East Asia.

The Vietnam War proved to be, if not a turning point, but by all means a halt to American exceptionalism. The American military might was not able to secure victory against a small nation, and for the first time ever the United States had suffered a defeat in a military campaign. Parallel to the war in Vietnam, and to a large degree on account of it, dissent grew at home and theretofore unseen violent confrontations became everyday events. On the heels of this internal turmoil came Watergate and with it a never-before-seen doubt as to the exceptional character of the American political system. The economy of the country was hit hard in the wake of the oil crisis during these years, and the

⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy's undelivered Trade Mart Speech, November 22, 1963, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/jfk-trademart/> accessed February 14, 2014.

⁴⁵ Inaugural Address of Lyndon Baines Johnson, January 20, 1965, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 437.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 439.

incoming Democratic president, Jimmy Carter often showed signs of irresoluteness and declared “that even our great nation has its recognized limits,” which idea was clearly blasphemy to many Americans.⁴⁷ The Vietnam syndrome appeared overwhelming.

It is no wonder that exactly around this time the first serious criticism of American exceptionalism appeared as well. The torchbearer was Daniel Bell, who simply argued that “the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation’s future.”⁴⁸ He was soon followed by such thinkers as Alexander Campbell or Laurence Veysey.⁴⁹ These authors very well reflected the feeling in the second half of the 1970s, when many Americans felt compelled to carry out both a self-examination and an imaginary question and answer session with the current leaders of the permanent American system. This legitimate critique did not question that the United States was in many ways different from the world, and several studies since then proved this view right.⁵⁰ These scholars simply put to the test whether the mission concept was a valid one under the new circumstances, and whether it was not time to be much more moderate in connection with the international community. But soon the pendulum swung again, and after the miserable years a new champion of American exceptionalism appeared on the scene, who reclaimed the concept’s prestige both at home and in the world at large.

Ronald Reagan was a well-known personality on the political scene and, on account of his movie career, he was a familiar face in most older households. Reagan came with not too many ideas but few very firm convictions, one of which was to restore the respect of the United States around the globe, and to prove that the path that America had been

⁴⁷ Inaugural Address of Jimmy Carter, January 20, 1977, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 465.

⁴⁸ Daniel Bell, “The End of American Exceptionalism,” *The Public Interest*, vol. 41 (Fall 1975), 197.

⁴⁹ See Alexander E. Campbell, “The American Past As Destiny,” in David H. Burton ed., *American History—British Historians*, (Chicago, Ill., 1978), especially 51–72; and Laurence Veysey, “The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered,” *American Quarterly* 31:4 (1979), 455–477, and since then one can see an unbroken line of criticism aimed at American exceptionalism.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45:1 (1993), 19–23.

following was the right one and the ideology that the Soviet Union represented belonged to “the ash-heap of history.”⁵¹ Reagan’s enthusiasm for his country’s elevated role and his belief in the American mission undersigned by God was nothing new. After all, it was he, who in 1964 sounded the memorable call for many: “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on Earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”⁵² This was his deep conviction and it became one of his trademarks that he often returned to. On the other hand, by the late seventies the great masses of Americans were hungry for something positive, and Reagan was the perfect man to ride such a wave. He asserted again and again that the United States had to meet its glorious destiny and fulfill its role as the keeper of liberty, in the wake of which the American nation “will become that shining city on a hill.”⁵³ After a long time it was Reagan who tried to bring back to the forefront the “city on the hill” metaphor, this time adding the adjective “shining” to it. By so frequently citing throughout his presidential years this somewhat changed version of the “city upon a hill” idea, according to a historian, Reagan “had captured the metaphor,” which “had become as inseparable from the American identity,” and, therefore, “his metaphor became a holy relic of the American civil religion.”⁵⁴

He easily defeated Carter in 1980 and a new era started in the sense that Reagan’s goal be met. He trumpeted proudly that the United States was the “last and greatest bastion of freedom,” and his people were “special among the nations of the Earth.” He clearly contrasted himself with Carter’s view of America’s limited capabilities, eventually leading the country to “abdicate this historical role as the spiritual leader of the

⁵¹ Ronald Reagan’s speech at the British House of Commons, June 8, 1982, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/06/reagans-westminster-speech> accessed October 3, 2013.

⁵² Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing” speech, October 27, 1964, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html> accessed November 15, 2013.

⁵³ Ronald Reagan’s official Announcement of being a candidate for U.S. President, November 13, 1979, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/11.13.79.html> accessed November 15, 2013.

⁵⁴ Richard M. Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill. The making and Unmaking of an American Myth*, New York, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012, 155.

Free World and its foremost defender of democracy.” Holding that Americans were special and it was “time for us to realize that we are too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams,” he considered the Carterian perspective a wrong reading of history.⁵⁵ He believed in positively and energetically stepping up and trying to curb Soviet influence wherever in the world it must be and could be done. In his view the United States was able to perform the task and **was** ready for it, the reward of which will be that America would “again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.”⁵⁶ For him America’s light was “eternal,” and the years ahead will see a United States marching “unafraid, unashamed, and unsurpassed.”⁵⁷ The world was an uncomplicated place in Reagan’s mind: light against darkness, good against evil, right against wrong. With such a simplified version of history it was easy to claim that the “nation is poised for greatness” and is “pledged to carry on this last, best hope of man on Earth,” which will succeed in turning “the tide of history away from totalitarian darkness and into the warm sunlight of human freedom.”⁵⁸

Since throughout the 1980s the United States started to become more and more successful and the Soviet Union was weakening at many points, Reagan seemed to be justified in claiming how exceptional America was. The large majority of Americans happily drank the words that strengthened their own gut belief about their place in the world. They readily agreed with the president that “this blessed land was set apart in a special way, that some divine plan placed this great continent here between the oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth who had a special love for freedom.”⁵⁹ Reagan achieved what he had set

⁵⁵ Peter J. Wallison, *Ronald Reagan. The Power of Conviction and the Success of His Presidency*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004, 286; First Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan, January 20, 1981, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 474.

⁵⁶ First Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan, January 20, 1981, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 476.

⁵⁷ Ronald Reagan, Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, August 23, 1984, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/82384f.htm> accessed November 20, 2013.

⁵⁸ Second Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan, January 21, 1985, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 484, 481.

⁵⁹ Ronald Reagan: “Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta, Georgia,” January 26, 1984. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40294> accessed February 17, 2014.

out to do. America regained confidence and a higher respect, while the Soviet Union and the socialist block en masse showed serious signs of heading toward collapse. Although Reagan could not know, but in a few months after his farewell speech to the nation the archenemy broke and democracy reached Central and Eastern Europe after forty years of socialist rule. Obviously this was further tangible proof of what he and others had been preaching, and Americans claimed it was their country's efforts that paved the way for these peoples for freedom. Again, this is one reading of what really took place, but this was the version that the United States and most of its citizens accepted as reality. To them, American exceptionalism was real and benevolent.

The Cold War was thus over and the new world situation meant new challenges for the United States, which had become, practically overnight, the sole superpower on the globe. This "unipolar moment" provided great possibilities and crucially problematic challenges for the country. Now it was not a tyrannical political system that it had to define itself against, rather it was about fulfilling historical roles and proving western democracy's victory over dark forces. The glorious days of the early 1990s gave proof to the thesis that the United States was special and it was the leading force for freedom loving nations. Containment was replaced by engagement, because the United States had to "continue to lead the world we did so much to make," and not only by actions alone, since, according to Bill Clinton, "our greatest strength is the power of our ideas."⁶⁰ The United States could almost do as it pleased, and when there was local strife or war, it was America alone that could decide the outcome or defeat of an opposition to the international will. This made quite a few minds giddy and, next to the cliché that the United States is the "world's greatest democracy," there came voices from the top that made many non-Americans shrink. Clinton was not joking when he stated that "America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation," or when he prophesied a twenty-first century "with America's bright flame of freedom spreading throughout all the world."⁶¹ In addition, the

⁶⁰ First Inaugural Address of William J. Clinton, January 20, 1993, Hunt, *The Inaugural Addresses*, 503.

⁶¹ Second Inaugural Address of William J. Clinton, January 20, 1997, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres65.html> accessed January 23, 2013. His secretary of state Madeleine Albright echoed Clinton when she asserted that "We are the indispensable nation: If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future." NBC's *Today Show*,

globalizing world benefited the American economy, people lived well on the average, and the world needed American money and assistance. This heightened self-confidence thus was the norm as the country stepped into the new millennium and woke up to some harsh realities.

But the end of history did not come and there was still room for further aspirations, not only on the part of the United States. When George W. Bush assumed the presidency, he did not show signs of being another prophet for American exceptionalism. He expressed the well-known lines about the leading role of the United States and the close relationship of it to freedom spreading on the globe. But 9/11 brought home both the vulnerability of even the United States, at least against a terrorist attack, and the more important point that there was unfinished work in the world out there for Americans. In other words, the safety of the country was again connected to the freedom agenda: that a world full of democracies will be a less hostile place. In this reading American exceptionalism became the benevolent freedom-spreading eagle. America had “lit a fire,” Bush proclaimed, and “one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.”⁶² The United States does nothing less, according to Bush, than “proclaims liberty throughout all the world.”⁶³ That is still the mission: to teach the world what freedom means. There is nothing cynical in this. This is not a selfish intention. They mean it. How can you doubt someone who believes that “we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom. This is the everlasting dream of America”?⁶⁴ This rhetoric was as high flying as the results of the two successive wars in the wake of 9/11 were low. More and more Americans and foreigners saw not a freedom fight in Uncle Sam’s actions but military occupation that led to nowhere: Iraqis were not better off than under Saddam Hussein, although there were token democratic developments. Afghanistan is even a lower success, if that word is applicable at all.

February 19, 1998, http://www.fas.org/news/iraq/1998/02/19/98021907_tpo.html accessed February 17, 2014.

⁶² Second Inaugural Address of President George W. Bush, January 20, 2005, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres67.html> accessed March 3, 2012.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ George W. Bush’s acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention, September 2, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57466-2004Sep2.html> accessed February 11, 2013.

The election results in 2008 were very much against the Bush-government, so Barack Obama's becoming president was only surprising in the sense that he was the first African-American who had ever won that position. Although many people saw him as an anti-Bush, and some of his steps were leading into that direction, if there was one thing that was common in both men was the belief in American exceptionalism. Actually, that was how Obama got in the limelight. When he announced his intentions to run for the highest office in the land, he boldly paid homage to America being different and better than all the rest of the countries of the world. As he put it, "I reject the notion that the American moment has passed. I dismiss the cynics who say that this new century cannot be another when, in the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, we lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good. I still believe that America is the last, best hope of Earth."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, he made a significant step away from the Bush years in this opening salvo for the White House. Instead of the mission achieved by military might, he emphasized that the United States "must lead the world, by deed and example," and that way the "beacon of freedom and justice for the world" would fulfill its historical role.⁶⁶

Everybody was hungry for a change in US foreign policy, and with Obama becoming the leader of the nation, it seemed a realistic expectation. Although Obama did gestures of good will toward countries that were anathema to the Bush White House, and, due to the economic recession, he was forced to concentrate more on the home front, his belief in America as the exceptional nation remained unshaken. In his first inauguration speech he proudly spoke about "the justness of our cause, the force of our example."⁶⁷ He made steps to wind down the war in Iraq, and he promised to finish the war in Afghanistan, but this does not mean that the American worldview has changed. On the other hand, his restrained actions are a testimony that the belief in American exceptionalism can live together with realism. The United States is still "the greatest nation on Earth," and, as an echo from the recent past, it

⁶⁵ Senator Barack Obama's speech at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 23, 2007, <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/fpccga> accessed February 15, 2013.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ First inauguration Address of Barack Obama, January 20, 2009, accessed February 22, 2010.

“remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs.”⁶⁸ And Obama is not timid about being an exceptionalist. Although an image has been created about him as the one who builds bridges rather than destroys them, and in comparison to his predecessor this might be true to some extent, he cannot change what he essentially is. He chose the United Nations General Assembly as the place to clear up any misunderstandings about this subject matter, when he declared to the leaders of all other nations present: “I believe America is exceptional.”⁶⁹ These and similar utterances by Obama rather strengthen than weaken American exceptionalism as an ongoing “religion” practiced by the overwhelming majority of Americans.

One can safely conclude that there is an unbroken tradition palpable in these utterances of the American presidents. They have always subscribed to and trumpeted, to various degree, the tenet of their country being exceptional. Some of them may have used the idea more vehemently, others with some calculation concerning domestic politics, but one would be a rash observer claiming that it was all for a show, these words being only a veneer that lacked internal substance. On the contrary, these politicians believed in the core philosophy of the United States being the center of the universe and a special place on earth under the watchful gaze and guidance of God. Since the American presidency has the unique tradition of acknowledging this concept, an unbroken path was long ago established. In the words of a historian, “paying homage to, and therefore renewing, this tradition of American exceptionalism has long been one of the presidency’s primary extraconstitutional obligations.”⁷⁰ Indeed, it is hard to imagine anyone gaining the highest office of the land without alluding to at least, if not energetically trumpeting the nation’s exemplary status among the countries of the world. This national creed and tradition is unlikely to disappear any time soon.

⁶⁸ Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address, January 24, 2012, accessed January 26, 2012.

⁶⁹ Barack Obama’s speech at the United Nations’ General Assembly, September 24, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-speech-at-the-un-general-assembly/2013/09/24/64d5b386-2522-11e3-ad0d-b7c8d2a594b9_story.html?hpid=z1 accessed January 11, 2014.

⁷⁰ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power. The End of American Exceptionalism*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008, 18.